



ZAHARI ZOGRAPH

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The portrait on the cover has the characteristics of a Renaissance work—a thoughtful face with an inquiring look, fine hands with delicate fin-

gers, the appropriate garments and a characteristic pose of the brush in the right hand. The colour scheme is well balanced and the shadow effects are beautifully executed. One would be inclined to think that this is a Renaissance portrait, and this would be only partly wrong, for Zahari Zograph's self-portrait is, indeed, a Renaissance portrait, but it belongs to the Bulgarian Renaissance or National Revival, which came several centuries after that flowering of the arts generally known as the Renaissance. This self-portrait was painted about the middle

days of Dürer, Rembrandt and David, artists in Europe had begun to search for new means of expression, and when conditions were ripe for the new art of Cézanne to make its appearance.

To understand this portrait, one should have at least a cursory knowledge of the development of Bulgarian culture. It is an old culture, its origin going as far back as the Early Middle Ages. In the 10th and the 14th centuries it attained heights unknown for those days, and was a model for the Slav Orthodox Christians as well as for the nascent Rumanian culture. Its advance was, however, suddenly and cruelly interrupted. At the end of the 15th century the Ottoman Turks captured Constantinople, the city that was the last stronghold of the Byzantine Empire and its culture. A century earlier the land of the Bulgarians had been conquered by the Turks, and the Bulgarian kingdom ceased to exist as an independent country for nearly five centuries. Many European countries have been conquered by foreign invaders, but there has never been anything like what happened in the Balkan Peninsula. Here cruel and savage con-

querors established themselves by fire and the sword, massacring the more enlightened people or, in the best case, forcibly Islamizing them, destroying the palaces, building minarets onto the churches and burning all the MSs and documents that fell into their hands. Legend has it that the Chinese scholars managed to save their cultural treasures from the barbarous onslaughts of the Mongolian conquerors by persuading them that the pleasure to be had from their use was greater than that of destroying them. But we also know that the Mohammedan conquerors ordered the destruction of the Alexandria library. If its books were contrary to the Koran, they maintained, they should be destroyed, and

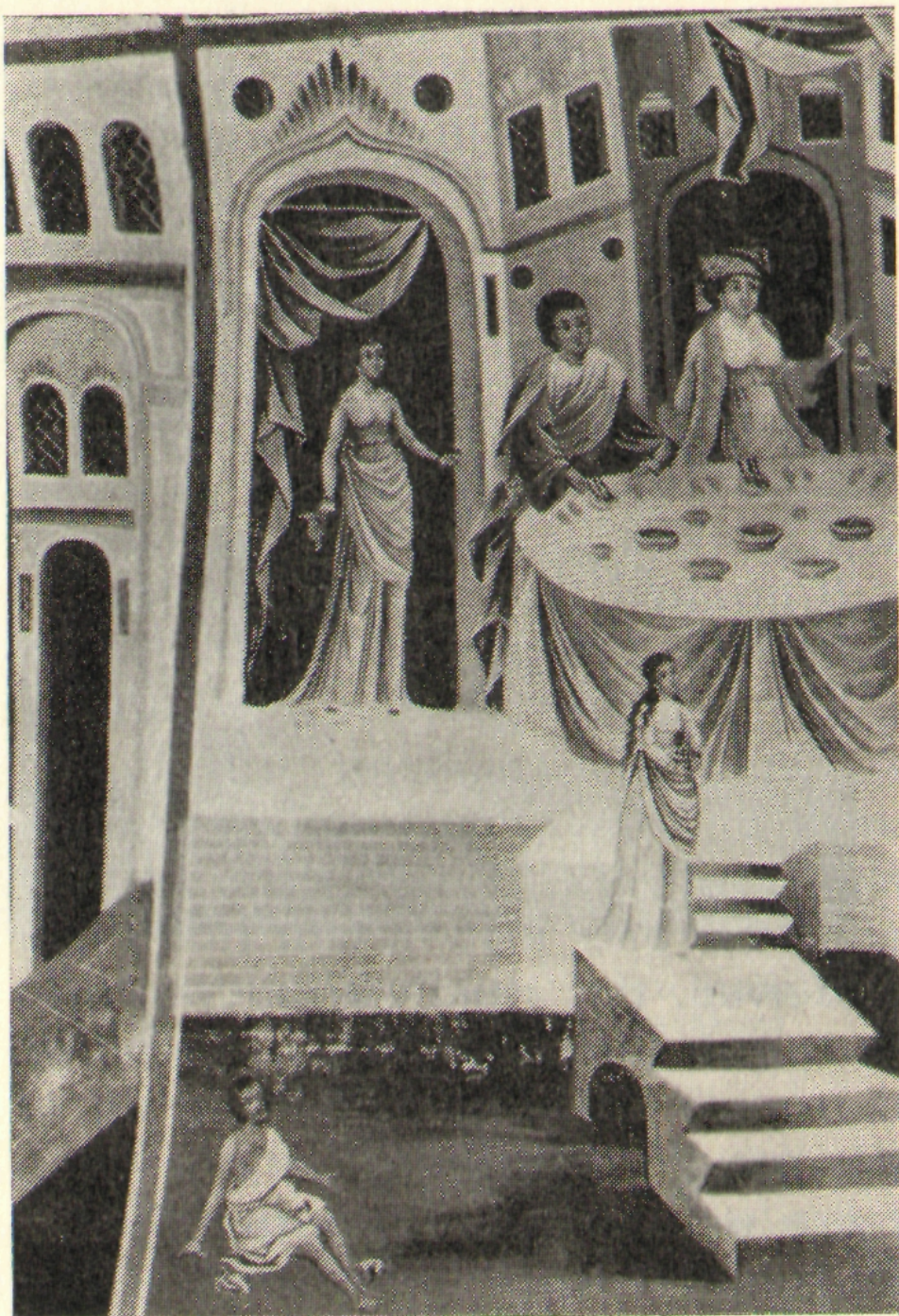
Landscape with buildings (drawing)
National Art Gallery, Sofia



if they were in the same spirit, then the Koran was sufficient. The Seldjuk Turks invaded Bulgaria and they thought that everything they found there was unnecessary and had to be destroyed, so they destroyed everything. Darkness and lawlessness spread over the land and the hard unenviable lot of slaves was the fate of the entire Bulgarian people.

The ideas on pure Christianity once harboured in Bulgaria, eventually had their impact on Europe. The first realistic art came into being in Bulgaria (the murals in the villages of Boyana and Ivanovo), but it was not destined to live long, and appeared much later in Italy. The European nations advanced and made their mark in civilization and culture, while in Bulgaria the population took refuge in the mountains and there was not even anyone there to record events and where they had taken place.

Only here and there in the white margins of prayerbooks and psalters semi-literate priests and monks set down with their quills and ink made of soot, when the plague broke out, or the Sultan's armies passed to the north or the west, and for the popu-



The Rich Man and the Beggar Lazarus, detail from
a fresco in the Church of the Holy
Archangels, Bachkovo Monastery

lation that was as much of a disaster
as the plague or any other epidemic.
Nothing more – absolutely nothing.
There was complete darkness.

What of art? The people sang their sad folksongs, unknown singers wove into them the dying memories of the past, of days of freedom, and the quiet complaints about their sorrowful daily life, and these were preserved by word of mouth from generation to generation in all their sorrow and hopelessness. If by chance – and this was a rare occurrence – permission was granted by the Turkish master for a little church to be built, or an old monastery restored, the order was that the building was to be small and low, dug into the ground, and its icons and walls were painted after the only models that had been preserved, the rigid Byzantine portraits of lifeless saints. In Europe there was scholarship, a flowering of the arts, the appearance of free ideas, there were struggles and revolutions – in Bulgaria there was complete despair and even denial of one's origin. The more intelligent began to turn to the Greeks, because knowledge of Greek, and familiarity with Greek customs and culture gave them greater opportunities for advancement. As this infection began to spread, there was danger that no trace would



The Death of the Rich Man, fresco in the Church of the Holy Archangels, Bachkovo Monastery

be left of all that had been called and had been Bulgarian. There was danger of an entire people disappearing for ever.

Then, in 1762, a small manuscript book, written by the monk Païssi in the Monastery of Hilendar on Mount Athos, *The History of the Slav-Bulgarians*, made its appearance. It may be naïve, the data it contains may not correspond to the historical



The Parable of the Ten Virgins, fresco
in the Church of the Holy Archangels,
Bachkovo Monastery

events and personalities, but it was read and copied, and passed from hand to hand, so that slowly, very slowly it caused a stir which gave rise to the Bulgarian National Revival of the late 18th and the 19th century.

What the monk Païssi did to arouse the people and to bring about a rebirth of their own original culture is the same as what Zahari Zograph



Judgement Day, fresco in the Church of
St Nikola, Bachkovo Monastery

did in the sphere of art. I called him a 'Renaissance' artist at first, but let us not forget that this father of modern Bulgarian art never left the boundaries of his country, never saw a single art gallery, had only 'heard' of the great world art in the west and in Russia in the north, and that he owed what he was solely to his own personal gifts and spirit.

Zahari Hristovich, whose surname was Zograph (a usual one for many mural painters) was born in 1810 in Samokov, a small town at the foot of the Rila Mountains. Both his father and his elder brother were well-

known mural painters in their day. His father died early, when the future artist was only ten years old, and life forced him to set out with his elder brother, going to churches and monasteries to earn his bread. His first independent work, according to the latest research, were some icons in the Church of Sts Constantine and Helena in Plovdiv. Besides the obligatory images of Christ, John the Baptist and other saints painted in the church, there were also several icons on Biblical subjects, on the creation and life of Adam and Eve. There we find something new and unknown before, painted in the year 1838: Adam, driven out of Paradise, digs the earth with a Bulgarian hoe, Eve spins wool from a distaff ornamented like those of every Bulgarian housewife, and some of the persons in the Biblical compositions are dressed in Bulgarian national costumes. Who inspired and encouraged the painter to engage in this work, so revolutionary for his day? Only the artist's heart, which urged him to make the saintly images close to man on earth, to make them earthly and comprehensible, his inspired heart



Deesis, fresco in the dome of the Church
of St Nikola, Bachkovo Monastery

and his great love for his oppressed fellow-countrymen.

In 1840 Zahari Zograph was called to the Bachkovo Monastery, situated south of Plovdiv in the folds of the Rhodopes. There he decorated the Church of St Nikola and other premises. Several of the remarkable frescos which he painted may still be seen and admired. Among them are his first version of Judgement Day (a subject which he later treated in other monasteries as well), his first interesting work both artistically and socially. It is topical, purposeful and novel. All the women who, as 'lewd women' are condem-

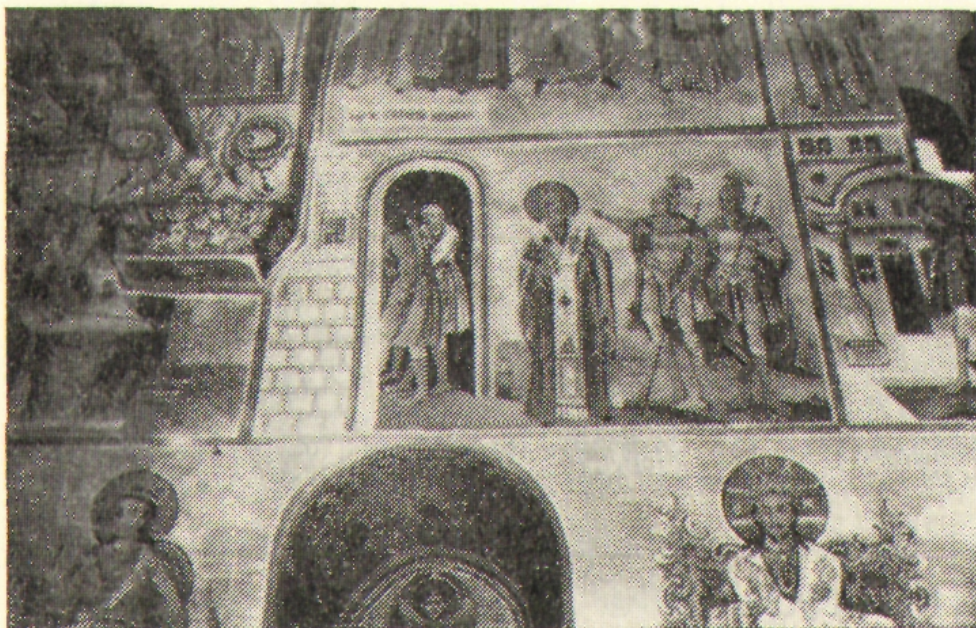
ned to the eternal fire, wear the clothes which were fashionable among the wealthy ladies of Plovdiv at that time: expensive dresses and hats, and one of them even, faced with the threat of eternal suffering, cannot restrain herself from settling her modish little hat still more firmly on her head. The women are beautiful, and behind them stand handsome men, probably those with whom they had sinned. Next to the townswomen who have sinned, there are several peasant women, also dressed in rich garments, wearing the costume of the Plovdiv region. The Bachkovo Monastery was often visited by rich people from Plovdiv, and the artist seems to have wanted to speak to them forever from the church walls, saying: 'Come and see yourselves, this will be your fate in the other world, for you have rejected the typically Bulgarian purity of morals.'

In this same fresco of Judgment Day the souls of women who have sinned are moving around the fires of hell, but this time their bodies are nude. This artist, who never studied in an academy, for whom no nudes ever posed, was able

to paint them with enviable anatomical knowledge. One cannot suppose that it was possible for him to observe and paint from life, when the customs of the country at that time are taken into consideration; it is quite improbable that even a woman of light morals would have

Fresco in the narthex of the Church of the Holy Archangels, Bachkovo Monastery





The Life of St Nikola, frescos in the narthex
of the Church of the Holy Archangels,
Bachkovo Monastery

consented to pose for him in the nude. She would not have understood why such a request was made to her.

In the fresco of Christ's parable of The Rich Man and the Beggar Lazarus, as in The Death of the Rich Man (when his soul is taken from his body), the garments worn by the wealthy families are those of the local notables of the town of Plovdiv. It is interesting to note that in the composition, contrary to all the laws of perspective, Lazarus is small and insignificant compared with the rich folk, although he is in the foreground. One wonders wheth-

er the artist did not thereby wish to stress the dignity of humility as opposed to the vanity of riches.

Another characteristic feature of Zahari Zograph's work – the landscapes, which form the background of his pictures – may also be seen at the Bachkovo Monastery. Up to then artists had used single colour neutral backgrounds in the painting of portraits and compositions. Zahari Zograph was the first to introduce the use of landscapes, the local Bulgarian landscape, in which the houses have the typical covered verandahs, bays and grated windows still to be seen in the old part of Plovdiv. He

The Dormition, fresco in the Church of
St Nikola, Bachkovo Monastery



also painted fields, trees and skies, taken from the landscapes that surrounded him. Again he brought the Bible close to all that surrounded his spectators. What is more, Zahari Zograph let posterity know that he had painted the frescos. Behind the abbot and his assistant, depicted in their ritual procession, the artist is also ranged in his heavy garments of a *zograph*, the sign of his craft, a pleasing one to God, and next to him is an inscription, which reveals that this is the artist Zahari Zograph of Samokov. This was the first time such a thing had been seen in the painting of Bulgarian murals, and one should not think that it was dictated solely by vanity, it was due to a sense of responsibility: if the work is sinful, I am the sinner, blame me. Or perhaps he signed his work so that people should really know who the innovator was.

The elements of his work I have described may be seen in all his frescos which have been preserved in the Troyan Monastery (1847–1848), in the Preobrazhenski Monastery near Turnovo (1849), and in the Rila Monastery (1844). He did not paint



Fresco in the crypt of the Church of the Holy Archangels, Bachkovo Monastery

himself in the Rila Monastery, for he worked there together with his brother and the craftsmen under him, so that he did not wish either to have the coming generations attribute the work of others to him, or to put himself forward.

Several particular features of the murals in these monasteries should be mentioned because they are purely his own. In the murals of Herod's Orgy at the Rila Monastery, Salomé

is a rich Bulgarian woman ; in Women Take their Children to Be Blessed by Jesus, the women are all dressed in Bulgarian costumes ; The Wedding in Cana shows the old wedding guests in folk costume, the servant is a typically local woman with her sleeves rolled up, wearing a Bulgarian apron. In the Troyan Monastery The Birth of the Virgin shows the child placed in a painted Bulgarian cradle ; Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery has all the figures dressed in local Troyan costumes ; the icons are those of local Bulgarian and several Russian saints (quite explicably, for at that times all the hopes the Bulgarians entertained of seeing their country liberated were centred on Russia), and there are also portraits of Bulgarian *tsars* and patriarchs. In the Preobrazhenski Monastery we find a real local scene of daily life for the first time : the artist holds witches up to obloquy, together with the peasants who superstitiously seek healing from sorcerers. They are all dressed in the costumes of the Turnovo villages.

Another remarkable painting in this monastery is The Wheel of Life.

There is a picture of Arnold Böcklin's painted in 1888 and called *Vita somnium breve*. It shows children at a spring, a beautiful young woman, a warrior on horseback, and a white-bearded old man with a stick, and

Mocking at Christ, fresco in the Church of St Nikola, Bachkovo Monastery



death above him. In 1849 Zahari Zograph painted a Wheel at the Preobrazhenski Monastery with symmetrical segments, showing man at different ages, from childhood to old age, so that visitors to the monastery might realize the transience of life and do good deeds while they lived.

Several scores of years ago, one never met cars, motorbuses and lorries on the roads in Bulgaria as one does today. People harnessed their cattle to their wooden iron-bound carts and the sound of these carts as they rattled over the roads has been immortalized in one of the finest stories in Bulgarian literature, *The Song of the Wheels* by Yordan Yovkov,¹ one of our best writers. These carts were decorated with beautiful designs of conventionalized flowers, painted in a lovely harmonious colour scheme. Zahari Zograph took his models from them, and from folk art in general, and used them for the decorative motifs he placed between the church compositions: ornaments, garlands and bunches of

¹ *Yordan Yovkov, 1880-1937*



Frescos in the narthex of the Church of the Holy Archangels, Bachkovo Monastery

flowers. These lovely colours in exquisite combinations may be seen on the monastery walls to this day, and one almost hears the sound of the little copper bells that used to be hung round the necks of young ponies, and the rattle of the iron-bound wheels on the cobbles of Bulgarian towns and hamlets. They spread wide the fame of the master painter, who learnt his art not in schools and academies, but from the traditions handed down to him in his own family, from his own gift and from his love of art and of his people, which allowed him to attain

the highest possible level in the dark age in which he lived.

Zahari Zograph tried his hand at portraits, but as he was unprepared for this type of painting, he found it difficult to rid himself of the technique of icon painting except in his self-portraits.

A zograph's life was hard in those days. His family lived in Samokov, the little town in which he was born, while he himself went the rounds of churches and monasteries on horseback, his saddle-bags full of the instruments of his craft, leaving in his wake his skill and his faith in life on icons and church walls. Nevertheless, he had time to correspond with his schoolmaster, Neophyte of Rila, the well-known educationist, and with other progressive persons, and even to contribute to the educational work in his country, and to the foundation of the first printing shop in Bulgaria. In some of the letters that have been preserved, he expresses his grief at having been unable to study in Russia and become a real secular artist. The last work he is known to have painted is the decoration of the Monastery of St Atha-

nasius in the monks' republic on Mount Athos in 1852.

In the Middle Ages, and even as late as the 17th century, flight offered the only means of escape from epidemics of the plague, and Bocaccio has

Paradise, detail from Judgement Day in the Church of St Nikola, Bachkovo Monastery





Sts Eustathius and Mercurius, fresco in
the Church of St Nikola, Bachkovo Monastery

taken such a moment as the setting
of his Decameron. A plague epidemic
broke out in Samokov in 1853, and
all those who had not fallen ill left

the town. Among those who fled were Zahari Zograph's family and that of his brother. Legend has it that Zahari returned to the infected town to nurse his sister-in-law, who lay there ill. This is supposed to have been the same Hristiania, whom he had loved and whose portrait he had tried to paint. Unable to save her, he himself caught the disease and died a fortnight after her, aged barely 43. The two tombstones may still be seen before the Samokov Museum. After sacrificing his whole life to the rebirth of his people, the great artist lost his life in a sacrifice. He did not live to see the liberation of his country.

Some readers of this sketch may have the occasion to visit Bulgaria and see Zahari Zograph's frescos. They certainly will not feel that surge of emotion and awe at his work which moves us Bulgarians, his descendants. But let it be known that he was one of those who lit the first sparks which set our country on its cultural advance, the advance which enabled our people to catch up with the rest of the civilized world in a few decades alone. That advance

is there for all to see, and the handsome man, whose portrait you see on the cover, had his share in it.



Drawing, National Art Gallery, Sofia

COLOUR PLATES

On the cover: Self-portrait

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2. John the Baptist, icon in the Church of Sts Constantine and Helena, Plovdiv
3. The Rich Man and the Beggar Lazarus, detail from a fresco in the Church of the Holy Archangels, Bachkovo Monastery
4. Judgement Day, detail from a fresco in the Church of St Nikola, Bachkovo Monastery
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10. St Nikola, fresco, Bachkovo Monastery
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13. The Wheel of Life, fresco, Preobrazhenski Monastery
14. The Rich Man and the Beggar Lazarus, fresco on the outside of the dome, Troyan Monastery
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- 16, 17. The Apocalypse, fresco on the outside of the dome, Troyan Monastery
- 18, 19. The Apocalypse, fresco on the outside of the dome, Troyan Monastery
20. Paradise, detail from Judgement Day, fresco, Troyan Monastery
21. Detail from Paradise, fresco, Troyan Monastery























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